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## THE BUSINESS OF A COLLEGE GREEK DEPARTMENT

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Twenty-five years ago it was plain sailing for the Greek professor. His business was to teach the Greek language to prepared students, and he had enough of such students to teach. His Freshmen, if they wanted the degree of Bachelor of Arts, came with a three years' preparation in Greek; and not only were they obliged to continue studying Greek for at least two years in college, but after that a very decent number of them went on with it of their own accord. The various Greek courses were given in general upon about the same plan. A small portion of an author was very carefully translated and explained, the student got a severe mental training in the process, gained more or less facility in translating Greek, exercised his English vocabulary to its advantage, and incidentally picked up bits of knowledge about various sides of Greek life and about the debt which our language and civilization owe the Greeks. To be sure there might be work in Greek prose composition, and a certain amount of supplementary reading in Greek history or the history of Greek literature. But these were minor exceptions. For graduate students, it is true, much more was done, but I have in mind in this article only the average course for undergraduates. Furthermore, what I shall say applies more fully to institutions west of the Hudson River than to those east of it, although there are none that can be regarded as complete exceptions.

The Greek department, as everybody knows, was affected more than others by the growth of the elective system, and especially by the introduction of the omnibus degree. These movements allowed the public to pick out its studies, with the result that high-school Greek classes rapidly decreased in size and in many cases disappeared entirely. So one college after another introduced

courses in beginning Greek. These elementary courses were often taken up with reluctance on the part of the instructor, who felt that he was doing high-school work, and complained that the times were out of joint. But complain or not, there was no escape; and there is now hardly a college where the elementary courses are not given.

Even when invited to this feast, the public still made excuses. Not many took beginning Greek in college after all, and the professor who had once been accustomed to a hundred students now taught twenty, including the beginners. The resulting ignorance of Greek was bad enough in itself, but it brought with it also ignorance of the Greeks and what they did in the world, a thing intolerable in young men and women who were to be stamped as educated people. Now many students who would not take the language could be reached by courses in Greek civilization, in which knowledge of the language was not required. And so Greek departments have more and more been giving such courses, usually taking up some one department of Greek life, such as Greek literature (in translation), Greek art, private life, or philosophy. And in spite of the opposition these courses have met with in some quarters, they are evidently here to stay as part of the Greek department's work.

The result is that where the business of the department formerly consisted of one thing, it now includes three things, namely: teaching prepared students of the language, teaching beginners in the language, and giving instruction in Greek civilization apart from the language. The changes have rudely disturbed the former comfortable program. And it is the main purpose of this article to look these changes squarely in the face, and discover what drops of comfort the professor of Greek, actual or prospective, may after all find in them.

It is plain that there has been a great loss, in that the number of people studying Greek has been so much reduced. The Greek professor feels this most keenly, and it is natural that he should, for the original literature is the thing he is most fond of. Perhaps he might be pardoned if he overestimated the loss, and I think he

had better confess that in some respects he has done this. To take first the matter of mental training. No one will deny that the mental training of the study of Greek is splendid—if the student really gets it. And of course if he takes Greek he will get it. Unfortunately the equation is not so simple as that. There is another quantity to be reckoned with, one that has been increasingly obtrusive in recent years. The late Professor Seymour of Yale once said to me, “If the classics go to the wall, it will be largely through the use of literal translations.” And it is indeed useless to say much about mental training when the “pony” does the real work. Twenty years or so ago there was still a considerable feeling among college students that the use of the pony was not quite honorable. That feeling has largely died out, and it is hardly too much to say that the practice is now adopted by three-quarters of the students of Latin and Greek. In some cases it seems even to be done on principle, for a recent graduate of Yale said to me in all seriousness, “You don’t mean to say that a man loses mental training by using a pony! Why, the best mental training a man can get is to read that trot, and then go to class and try to get the right English word tacked on to the right Greek word!” I fear this is all too typical of the present undergraduate’s notion of mental training. There may be a right use of translations, but the undergraduate will never find it, nor will he stick to it if someone points it out to him.

Then some weight must be given the complaints English teachers make about the effect of Greek and Latin study upon the use of English. Whatever they will admit about the good results of such study, they will not let us forget that there have been some bad ones. Greek and Latin habits of speech, of which the most conspicuous is the tendency to keep working the participle, have gotten into the English of classical students and have been hard to get out. So the loss of English training formerly gained by the study of Greek has not been entirely unmitigated.

But what about the decreasing appreciation and enjoyment of Greek literature? The study of translations must be largely a study of content, for style is to a great degree a matter of rhythm and arrangement, both of which vanish in translation. Really to

appreciate Greek literature or any literature, one must of course be able to read the original, taking in the meaning and feeling the rhythm at the same time. Here is where the great loss ought to come. And it is perhaps because it ought to come that we Greek teachers have sometimes been too deaf to the claim that it has not come. Opponents of Greek often declare that undergraduates have seldom acquired enough facility in reading Greek to allow them to get much idea of a Greek writer's movement and style. I think it is time to admit cheerfully that on the whole they are right, and to discard from among the causes of our gloom the loss of this particular result of Greek study, which has had such a feeble existence.

Finally, the information about Greek civilization which undergraduates picked up under the older system was of a very piecemeal and unsystematic kind. And when it came to the influences of Greek work in the world, they got little more than a taste of the subject.

Now all this must not be understood as an admission that the study of Greek in the past has been a failure. The present writer is not trying to exhort his colleagues to sing their *morituri sumus* with good cheer, because forsooth they deserve to perish. The loss that has come with the falling off of Greek study has been a very great one indeed, and cannot really be repaired except by a revival of that study. But the sooner one faces the facts, the more quickly will he readjust himself. And then it does somewhat dispel the discouragement of the age of iron to realize that even the golden age had its flaws.

This alone, to be sure, would be cold comfort. It is more to the point that the Greek professor now has in his own hands the power to remedy these former defects, and to show that instruction in the Greek language can be everything he claims it should be. This is one of the real beauties of the present situation. Formerly the high-school teacher might be at fault, or at any rate it was easy for the professor to think so. Now, however, when beginning Greek is taught in college, the professor has absolutely virgin soil to work upon. The problem is brought straight to his door, and he can

wrestle with it himself. Then when he has worked it out, he can go to the high-school teacher and carry the solution there.

To my mind, the professor's first duty toward the study of Greek is to eliminate the use of translations. We have trifled with this pest too long, looking sternly out of one eye while we winked with the other. It is partly the fault of instructors that students take the use of translations so lightly. The habit has now got down into the high schools, as indeed it was bound to do, so that a good foundation in the study of any language—not simply Greek alone—is none too common a thing. The instructor who thinks he can usually tell when a man is using a translation cannot convince me. One has only to say that to students and watch them smile. And while we will punish a man for handing in another man's theme, we lie down helplessly before a kind of borrowing, which, though not so flagrant, is as truly subversive of an important purpose of our study. But what use in forbidding it when it is so hard to detect? At the time bicycles were particularly popular, the state of Massachusetts made the theft of a bicycle a very serious offense, just because of the difficulty in detecting it. We must do the same with the use of translations. They should be forbidden absolutely, and the penalty made severe enough to prevent chances being taken. Then we shall have the right to talk with emphasis about the mental exercise demanded by the study of Greek.

To keep Greekisms out of the student's English is only a matter of constant watchfulness. The remedy does not lie in eliminating the practice of literal translation, for that is a pedagogical asset, if not a pedagogical necessity. But the trouble has usually come from allowing such translation to pass for the finished product instead of the preliminary rough work. The best teacher may coach his students to use literal translation as a means of getting at the thought and becoming accustomed to the Greek order, but he will insist that the thought when gotten shall in every case be transferred to natural English before the exercise is regarded as finished. The Greek and English idioms are so different that this transfer makes great demands both upon the mental energy and upon the vocabulary of the student, and becomes a particularly effective means of intellectual training and of practice in the use

of English. Cicero said that the most potent influence in forming his style was translation from the Greek. The college professor now has the opportunity to make the most of the same instrument.

But the most vital question affecting the future study of Greek is the question whether or not students can really be taught to read Greek in college. This does not mean read in the sense of translate, but read as one reads German or French. On this question hangs the student's prospect of real appreciation and enjoyment of the literature. It would hardly be right to claim that it had already been answered in the affirmative. No doubt there have been students who learned to read, but they have been the exception rather than the rule. Certainly the number of men who have studied Greek from five to seven years without being really able to read it has been an uncomfortably large one. And right here is the professor's greatest chance. If he can demonstrate that a man of average ability can learn to read Greek as well in four years, let us say, as he can learn to read German in three, then there is hope that Greek may again occupy a very substantial place in the curriculum. I believe that it can be done, and that it will be done generally if college teachers earnestly address themselves to it. Greek syntax is easy, especially when one has studied Latin. Greek forms are easy, except the verb. Prose composition should be practically given up and attention concentrated on the reading. There are then three things to master, the verb, the vocabulary, and the habit of taking in the thought in the Greek order. I see no reason in the nature of things why the right sort of practice should not master all three, just as it masters similar difficulties in German. Somehow the college professor is likely to feel that it reduces his standing as a scholar to become noticeably active in trying to improve pedagogical methods. It is like leaving the word of God to serve tables. Now every man of sense believes a teacher should keep up his independent study and investigation; but it is probably true that the teacher could do as much for the cause by working on the problem of teaching students to read Greek as he could by any piece of research he has on hand.

But what of the courses in Greek civilization? The offering of such courses, it is true, has in general been brought about by

force of circumstances, for there seemed to be no other way of reaching any considerable number of students. Can the Greek department, then, find in these courses anything except a bitter pill which it must swallow in order to save itself from ruin? It may encourage an affirmative answer to remember that at Harvard University a course in Greek private life, which does not require knowledge of the language, was begun by Professor John Williams White thirty years ago. And yet, from some things that are said, one might think that the department that gave such courses had fallen from grace and yielded basely to the degeneracy of the times. A Greek professor in a prominent eastern college told me not long ago that he had "not yet fallen so low" as to give a course in Greek literature through translations. It is true that these courses are not so good for the student as the vigorous training of the language. They can never be a substitute for the language. But neither does anybody think they can be; and the student who sees the difference between French and French history or between Italian and Italian art, will not be led to believe that through the courses in Greek civilization he is getting the results of the old Greek training in a new and easy way.

But whatever the motive for the introduction of the courses in question, and however they compare in value with the study of the language itself, it still remains to be said that they are thoroughly worth while when compared with other things the student takes. The purpose of education, as far as content goes, is to gain a knowledge of the world. But there is no single phenomenon, unless it be the appearance of Christianity, that holds a place of such supreme importance in the march of the world's progress as does the civilization of the Greeks. And even if one takes a more practical view of education, and thinks the purpose of it is to enable him to understand the world just as he sees it about him, even then he needs to trace back to their source in ancient Greece the many streams of influence that have flowed down to us and are still running in our time. Who can really understand the architecture he sees every day, or the mythology he finds imbedded in modern literature, without going back to ancient Greece? But why go into these well-known details? It has often been said that we



must understand the life of the Greeks in order fully to understand our own.

And yet after all do we need to go back? Our modern writers, thinkers, and artists have used most of the materials turned out by ancient Greece, and worked them into their own productions. Let us take them as we find them there, and think nothing about sources or origins. To an over-busy age, this sounds sensible. But in the only parallel case, namely that of our religion, it is precisely what we do not do. The Hebrew teachings have been used, digested, assimilated, and reproduced with later and more original matter by modern theologians, preachers, and writers. Nearly all the important teachings of the Bible can be found imbedded in modern publications. In a religious discussion between Harvard students one of the company insisted, with a certain kind of truth, that a well-known Harvard professor had given to the world a higher revelation of God than had Jesus Christ. Nevertheless we keep going back directly to the teachings and life of the great founder of our religion. We insist on hearing the old, old story. It is refreshing to throw aside the complicated superstructure that later thinkers have built up, and get back to the solid and simple foundations. And who that knows the march of civilization will deny that the solid and simple foundations of our intellectual and artistic life are found in ancient Greece just as truly as the foundations of our religious life are found in ancient Palestine? It is equally refreshing, clarifying, and stimulating to get back to them, only the fact is not as generally recognized. And how will the fact be generally recognized, if we rigidly interpose the language between the public and the revelations of Greece?

After all we are really not in the habit of insisting ruthlessly upon originals. We teach the important lessons of Palestine through translation. And we do not tie ourselves to originals in the study of art. We feel that casts and photographs are not only necessary but worth while. Of course the best way to study Greek civilization is to do it with a knowledge of the language. And it is equally true that it would be far better to study the original works of art than to get one's acquaintance with them through reproductions. But all cannot do it that way. Neither under present conditions

can all learn the lessons of Greek life by going to the original language. To be sure the difficulties in the way are of a very different sort, and far more students could take Greek than do actually take it. But even the student who has studied the Greek language for several years can take courses of the kind now in question with profit. At Harvard University, students of the language, even graduate students, have for thirty years been taking the course in Greek private life started by Professor White. The catalogue of a state university in the Middle West expressly states that the course in translated Greek literature can be taken with advantage by students of the language. In fact such students find in systematic courses on Greek civilization something that was lacking under the old order of things. For these courses serve to gather up the broken threads of information which the language student has incidentally gathered while reading his pieces of the literature, and weave them up with much that he has never learned into something symmetrical and well rounded.

Why should it be thought a fall from grace for the Greek department to make the great thoughts and works of ancient Greece an independent subject for teaching? Why in fact should it not be its business to put the modern world in touch with ancient life on every side and in every way possible? The Greeks are as important for us in the realm of the intellect and of aesthetics as the Hebrews are in the realm of religion. But we employ an army of specialists to talk to us from countless pulpits in order to keep in touch with the products of Hebrew genius in religion, and even if they have forgotten the Hebrew alphabet we do not feel any lack of dignity in their calling. Of course Greek is far more worth learning than Hebrew, and its alphabet is not so easily forgotten. But so long as we insist that every man ought to get benefit from his Hebrew inheritance; so long as the thoughts, visions, faith, love, of the ancient Hebrews are given to the layman for his weekly food, we have no right to feel that ancient Greece cannot greatly benefit the modern world except through her language. And if the Hellenist be not the man to teach the gospel of Hellenism, then who is?

But Greek courses without Greek are not enough as a discipline. This is the point, I suspect, where many minds have felt the rub all

along. And the simplest answer to that objection is that if you allow it you rule out of the curriculum your courses in English literature, in philosophy, and in history. For the material and methods of a course in translated Greek literature are of the same sort as those of a course in English literature; philosophy is the same in the department of Greek as in that of philosophy; and the other courses in Greek civilization match the work of the department of history. There is the same kind of mental effort on both sides, and an equal chance for mental discipline. To be sure it can never be the strenuous discipline given by the study of the Greek language. But the professor still offers the student the language. The student who wants a thorough cultural training will take it, if he gets good advice; and it is as good for him as ever. In fact, as has been said above, the professor now has the opportunity to make it better than ever.

But the teacher of Greek may find still further comfort in the fact that the non-language courses—to use an ill-sounding term—are good for himself. This, it is true, applies more to the small college than to the large university with its more numerous instructors. But the professor in the small college is much the more common type, and he is more likely to give the non-language courses himself. These courses add variety to his work, for they require methods different from those employed in the language study, and they keep him moving over more extensive fields, bringing him constantly in touch with a far larger number of problems. Not only is his knowledge of Greek civilization bound to be rounded out, but fruitful spots for investigation are brought to his notice. For several years I have given at Adelbert College the most general kind of course, one that starts with a brief review of Greek civilization and then traces the influences of that civilization down through the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, to modern times. This course is intended to be an introduction to the work of the department, and it teaches the very least that any educated man ought to know about the Greeks. It may be looked upon as an extreme instance of the non-language idea. But I am sure it has been a valuable thing for the students, and I know that

to the instructor it has been not only a most fascinating study, but also an inexhaustible source of knowledge and illumination, for it requires a study of the later ages as well as an acquaintance with Greek civilization itself. Furthermore, in giving the more general courses the teacher has his educational sympathies broadened. When he teaches Greek literature in translation he has to face the constant problem of the English teacher, namely, how to lead the student to an enjoyment of the literature, and at the same time give him some real study and thinking. And in other courses he begins to realize what the difficulties and labors of the history teacher are, and finds in them a new challenge to his thinking powers. For his own sake, indeed, why should he wish to get back to the older and narrower set of courses?

He would be glad, of course, to have more students in the language, and he certainly ought to have them, for apart from the matter of discipline, the language is the most splendid production of Greek genius. But he has a right to feel that when he is trying to perfect methods of teaching beginning Greek, and trying to spread a knowledge of the Greeks and of our Greek inheritance, he is laying the best foundation that can now be laid for a future increase in the number of those studying the language. For when people realize what Greek and the Greeks mean to the world, they will begin to suggest to their friends, relatives, sons, and daughters, that the really cultivated man and woman ought to study Greek, especially if it has been demonstrated that the average student can really learn to read Greek in college.